



BULLIES MUST BE STOPPED EARLY

BY MARK K. MCQUILLAN

Reeling from back-to-back student suicides, the apparent effects of relentless mistreatment by other students, Massachusetts passed an anti-bullying law this year. Forty-four states have such laws, including Connecticut, but often they fail to make a difference.

Although anecdotal, the Connecticut Department of Education keeps track of allegations of bullying in school that come to its attention. Since Connecticut's law was passed in 2002, the department has learned of more than 1,000 cases, nearly 800 just in the past five years. We are about 35 cases ahead of last year at this time, nearing 200.

Even with state laws, the problem of bullying is apparently increasing. What is going on in the lives of our teens and pre-teens? Must families

and schools be satisfied with the status quo and learn to live with bullying, forcing children to learn and socialize in hostile and unsafe environments? Is there a way to reach bullies and change behaviors that state laws don't address?

For parents and students, bullying can be a nightmare, a never-ending struggle for dignity, safety and feelings of self-worth. It can take away a student's academic career and sacrifice a bright future. School administrators and teachers also struggle to do what is right and appropriate.

Bullying laws tend to be reactive, obligating schools to intervene whenever a "verified case of bullying" is identified. At that point, some form of punishment is generally delivered to the bully. Counseling may also be given to the perpetrator

and the victim. These measures often have little effect.

Why? First, bullying as a concept is exceptionally vague and highly toxic. No school administration wants to admit it has much, if any, bullying. The same is true for families. It is rare to see parents or guardians openly accept that their child is a bully, and children will not admit it, either.

The second part of the answer is the difficulty of determining what exactly bullying is in school.

State law says it is "any overt acts by a student or group of students with the intent to ridicule, harass, humiliate or intimidate the other student while on school grounds, at school-sponsored activities or on a school bus, which acts are committed more than once against any student during the school year." The law further says local policies may address bullying outside of the school setting if it has an impact on a student's academic performance or safety in school.

Determining whether an allegation rises to the level of a "verified act of bullying" rests at the school district level, not with the state Department of Education.

All the states with bullying laws agree abuse of power is a key to identifying a bully. This abuse of power begins with small, seemingly innocent acts of name-calling, teasing, exclusion, laughing at, making fun of and other interactions that are easy to stop if they are caught immediately. But when authorities wait to intervene until something rises to the level of blatant bullying, it is far too late. Even experts, however, do not know, much less

agree upon, what bullying, looks, feels and sounds like in practice. One teacher's understanding of bullying is another's, "Oh, they're just kidding around."

Educators and parents must understand that bullying begins with mean-spirited or hurtful interactions. Stopping these behaviors, however minor, is critical to forestalling more aggressive bullying and changing a school's environment. Our guidance should be that "if it's mean, intervene."

We must develop school cultures that are based upon respect, understanding, compassion for others and personal responsibility. Educators must invest time and attention to help all students acquire these perspectives and attributes.

Connecticut legislators passed our law with the best intentions — not to be reactive and punitive — but rather to try to ensure that all children have the right to learn and socialize in physically, emotionally and intellectually safe school climates. Prevention of bullying cannot rely on punishment after the fact — it's about improving school climate before someone gets hurt. This is a job for everyone. We must all work to develop strong school cultures that are based upon respect, understanding, compassion for others and personal responsibility.

This is what civic responsibility means.

Mark K. McQuillan is the state commissioner of education. This article originally appeared in the Hartford Courant on June 20, 2010.